

CHAPTER V

FROM SMALL SEEDS

Coming Down to Earth

The spectacle of the falling space lab momentarily lighting up the dark night provided an impressive and expensive firework display.¹ It also provided a warning sign to a high technology society at the very moment that it had achieved its first step in the ancient dream of reaching the stars. Since the Tower of Babel humans have tried to climb as high as their ingenuity and technology would take them. This upward climb was dramatically accelerated by the age of science and has permeated all aspects of civilization - politics, economics, institutions, careers and even religion. But what lit up the darkness above Australia was the falling space lab. Was a fiery message being flashed to earth that humankind had reached the apogee of its vertical flight? Was the very force, which has bound humans to this planet now finally, claiming its own? The downward plunge of technological debris is a stark reminder that earth is the first and final resting place, the soil, out of which all life must grow and finally return. This is not the first time that heavenward attention has been redirected to the base realities of earth. "Galileans, why are you standing there looking up at the sky?" (Acts 1:11). Walt Whitman stated it in these terms:

Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons
It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with the earth.²

The repeated efforts to posit truth and power at the peak of hierarchical systems, of elevated monuments, prestigious peaks, Olympic heights, to regulate the life and destiny of others from a central office has been foiled again and again. The first recorded effort to build one singular edifice for the control and unification of humanity was destroyed by God from beneath. The Tower of Babel story is one of undermining a monolithic authority by the "confusion" of languages. Each Republic is now making its claim and seriously threatening the Soviet Government. Efforts to direct the human race by means of synthetic unity are being replaced by a process of organic plurality. It is not the single formulation of the truth, but the rich diversity of expressions of the truth that creates a symbiotic system that is able to regenerate. "Galileans, why look up into heaven when the soil provides you with a richer, more healthy and more enduring option?" The more synthetic the system the greater the uniformity. The more organic the system the greater the varieties. Monolithic systems ultimately are foiled by the yearning for freedom and diverse expression from the base. The prodigious effort by Lenin to impose a single ideology on a revolution initiated by the workers eventually failed and led to the social upheavals of 1989 and the amazing collapse of Communist control in 1991. That could also be the outcome in the West where gigantic corporations and vast government agencies seek more and more to control political and economic systems. The way to stability is through diversity.

The upward scramble of industrial development in both the East and the West has beguiled earth's populations with visions of a new and better life for all, but those dreams now threaten to turn into nightmares. Benefits have not come to all. The rich become richer, the poor poorer. Meanwhile earth's resources are depleted. The quality of life has not been enhanced by quantity. Destruction at the hands of our neighbors nearby, through personal attack, or from strangers far away through atomic holocaust are the measure of our security. Although we can send a select few for a brief visit to the moon, we cannot hold together as neighbors on earth. In short, what is primary has become secondary and what is secondary has become primary. The urgent question facing us is "How much longer can we grow on like this and continue to ignore the base?" When and how do we shift priorities from building secondary systems to rebuilding primary ones?

Lewis Mumford addressed that question in his book, *The City in History*. He wrote:

If we were prepared to restore the habitability of the earth and cultivate the empty spaces in the human soul, we should not be so preoccupied with sterile escapist projects for exploring interplanetary space, or even more rigorously dehumanized policies based on the strategy of wholesale collective extermination. It is time to get back to earth and confront life in all its organic fecundity, diversity, and creativity, instead of taking refuge in the under-dimensioned world of Post-historic Man.³

Toward A Human Scale

Scale is not just a "numbers game" matter of quantity but of quality. Whether we view human community in terms of its larger constellations of institutions, cities, corporations, nations, etc., or in smaller and more intimate ones of families, support groups, friendships, there is a significant shift from one to the other in the way reality is viewed. The critical difference lies in which scale is selected as the norm. Should the family or "primary life" area, however conceived, be a replica of all the qualities and features that are deemed best to serve the larger structure? Or should the larger human communities preserve and protect the qualities of the smaller communities? Which one exists for the sake of the other? Although I will argue eventually that it is a matter of interdependence between the two, first I want to explore the question of human scale. By "human" I mean a level of interaction that allows the richest interplay between the individual and the group, the private and the public and the religious and the political.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution, if not long before, secondary systems have been on the ascendancy, so much so that it is simply assumed that the primary is to be subordinated to the secondary. Marriage, parenting and other primary responsibilities yield to career and production efficiency. Impressive structures have been built over the base, even drawing on its strengths. But the base itself has been neglected. "Bigger is better" is part of the uncritically accepted credo of the industrialized West implying, of course, that small is inferior, undeveloped, low grade, primitive. Upward mobility is the principal way success is measured despite the calamities of the "Peter Principle." The base is "base." "Domestic" has come to imply something of less value, incompetent and non-credentialed and, therefore, usually barred from the councils of power. "Jones," says the boss at the staff meeting, "This is no place to talk about your private affairs." The persons whose lives are most involved and identified with the domestic world - women and children - are subsequently assigned lesser value. The consequences of this imbalance are evident. On the one hand primary communities are rapidly disintegrating. The household, natural setting for renewal and support, often becomes the place most draining to human energies and damaging to personal gifts. Escaping from it becomes the occasion for more frenzied activity in one's secondary world. On the other hand the very qualities that are required in primary relationships - compassion, intuition, caring - have less and less entree into the secondary structures that so desperately need them.

All of this has not happened by accident. The process of the increasing routinization is the result of deliberate choices based on values that are proving destructive to the human venture.

Recent studies in professionalism show that professionalism did not emerge, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in response to clearly defined social needs. Instead, the new professions themselves invented many of the needs they claimed to satisfy. They played on public fears of disorder and disease, adopted a deliberately mystifying jargon, ridiculed popular traditions of self-help as backward and unscientific, and in this way created or intensified (not without opposition) a demand for their own services. . . . Thus the medical and psychiatric assault on the family as a technologically backward sector went hand in hand with the advertising industry's drive to convince people that store-bought goods are superior to homemade goods.⁴

The assumption that professional institutions can do a better job than non-professional groups is coming under severe criticism both from without and from within. Many professionals are realizing that having to be God is proving to be a bit too much! But fortunately we don't have to be gods to each other. There are alternative ways of going about the human enterprise. We can reverse the direction and develop more and more human-scaled communities.

Is there such a thing as an appropriate human scale? Are there limits beyond which the human venture loses its human character? Kirkpatrick Sale contends that there are such limits and that modern society has exceeded them. He observes that the Greek Parthenon, whose beauty has been universally proclaimed, was built in multiples of the human adult (5'7") and that Greek city-states were organized around a modest size of 5000 citizens.⁵ On this scale a high culture was realized. In contrast the size of modern cities and institutions makes them destroyers of culture rather than creators. The Greek notion that the human is the measure of *all* things raises some theological problems, but the more modest point that the human is the measure of *some* things, ought not. Christ suggested as much when he said that the Sabbath was made for humans and not the reverse (Mark 2:27).

In the midst of the creation of ever-larger commercial and governmental systems (A Federated Europe, the United Nations, huge consolidated banks etc.) there is a need to build "little publics". The appropriate scale can liberate resources otherwise ignored or undiscovered. An example of this is the emergence in Germany of *Klein Kunst*. That means literally "little art". Local artists are encouraged to perform in their own neighborhoods thus greatly

enlarging the number of cultural events in the country, but more importantly, also providing more opportunities for the discovery and performance of otherwise unknown artists. This wise allocation of government resources at the local level has obvious long-term benefits for the national and international level. The scaling of human communities has not only political consequences but cultural ones as well.

The significance for the church of human scaled communities is clear from this statement of Jim Wallis of the Sojourner's Community in Washington, D.C.:

The purpose of God in Christ is neither simply to redeem individuals nor merely to teach the world some new thought. God's purpose in Christ is to establish a new community that points to the plan of God for the world. Forming community has been the social strategy of the Spirit since Pentecost.⁶

In a generation that seems to be caught between the extremes of individualism and collectivism the scale that I would advocate human scaled communities. What if the criterion for measuring progress were the quality of life of the local community rather than the individual or the nation? I believe such a shift to a middle range scale would make for healthier individuals and healthier nations. This means in some cases reducing the scale but in some cases it might mean enlarging the scale. In any case it means finding the appropriate scale.

A little means a lot at least in Holland. During our sojourn in The Netherlands (1990-91) we tried to be sensitive to the local culture and would begin our encounters with "*Spreekst u Engels?*" "Do you speak English?". The answer was almost always, "A little". However, the Dutch person would then proceed to speak a good deal of English and to do so very well. "A little" came to mean for us in Holland "a lot".

Holland is a small country and has had to learn to do a lot with a little. Much of its limited land surface lies beneath sea level. But through centuries of effort considerable land has been wrested from the sea. Although its population is not large Dutch people can be found all over the world. They seem to be in every international organization. Not only are they present there, but also it has been my repeated experience at international meetings that the Dutch delegation is one of the best informed. The Dutch seem to do well with their smaller size.

I have wondered about this phenomenon of size especially since I come from a very large country. I have wondered if one of the reasons why a little goes a long way is the scale of the country. When you can literally jump on a bike and attend a national committee meeting and be home for supper, I would suppose that you are not overwhelmed by the size of the issues you face either. In that scale the individual has a greater sense of participation and importance. Perhaps that is why the Dutch seem to be so well informed on domestic as well as global issues. They live in a human scaled society.

Perhaps the reason for this ability to do much with a little is the experience of being a small nation amidst large ones. One needs to be alert, facile and flexible when surrounded by giants who do not always look where they step. The attention paid to the behavior of others in order to survive seems to produce a certain wisdom and skill that most of us do not bring to the community of nations. Whatever the reasons, I am inspired and encouraged by how much "a little" means when spoken by the Dutch. I don't think they are being overly modest when they make that response, but rather I think they have learned to be content with the smaller scaled world they inhabit and know their circumstances have given them something special. Small is beautiful and a little is a lot.

What is the significance of all of this for the Christian church? In her own long history of institutionalization the church has, unfortunately, incorporated many of the same procedures and values as the rest of the secondary systems. The church's presence in society in her most visible form as institution does little to correct the imbalance. However, there is a unique opportunity, I believe, for the church to revitalize herself and society by rediscovering primary community at the base. The more the church adopts the human scale the more meaningful will become worship, the more the gifts of God's people will be revealed, the deeper will become the understanding of the relationship to God and neighbor and the more involved church members will become in the life of the world.

Taking Risks

The small scale is an important factor because it allows the worship to grow out of the shared experiences of the group. While public worship may be more ornamented in the larger church settings, it rarely has the power that fuller participation provides in more intimate settings. The point is not to replace one with the other, but to note that some things can take on deeper meaning at the base. Perhaps an incident out of our community at ARC plus some

other stories about small scale might illustrate the points I have made above. The first story is about taking a risk in a small ecumenical gathering.

There are many risks when you wander out into uncharted territory with no detailed road map to follow. Maps eventually are drawn after you have explored many valleys and trails and ascended the heights to get your bearings again. Some day the map will be there to direct the traveler but in the mean time there is a good deal of trial and error. That's exciting but sometimes disappointing and even painful. But one learns and in the long run others benefit too. That certainly has been true in the history of the ARC Retreat Community that set out to explore new territory in 1977.

One of the difficult but rich learning experiences at ARC has had to do with the celebration of the Eucharist. In the Christian tradition the sharing of this ancient ritual, however, has been fraught with difficulties. It is such a central and sacred rite and so carefully protected by each tradition that celebrating an "ecumenical" Eucharist is risky business. Yet we wanted to anchor the life of the ARC community firmly in the heart of the Christian faith and make the Eucharist a regular part of the community's life. At the same time, however, we hoped from this source of the resident community's worship would come a retreat environment where people of all faith traditions would feel at home. But we had no prepared road maps for this journey.

Early in the history of ARC a group of seminarians from several theological schools in the Upper Midwest came to ARC for a weekend retreat as part of a course on spirituality they were taking through the consortium of seminaries. There were both Roman Catholic and Protestant students in the group. On Sunday morning at the conclusion of the retreat it was the practice at ARC to celebrate the Eucharist. That decision was usually made during the course of the retreat so that it came as matter of common consent and not as something forced. In this particular retreat, however, the Roman Catholic students caucused and decided to have their own Eucharist late Saturday afternoon. The Priest, who was one of the team teaching this course, felt caught in a bind. He was a very good friend of ARC and a most gentle and open person. But in this situation he felt that he was officially representing his Church and therefore was obligated to follow its policies. He eventually concurred that the Catholic students should have their own service.

Since the particular course in which the students were enrolled was an effort at ecumenical cooperation, this decision came as a blow to others on the retreat. One Protestant student was so upset when he heard of this decision of the Roman Catholics that he went to the priest and announced that he would join them in their service whether they wanted him or not. It was to be his form of protest. That challenge, of course, did not make please anyone. But the student felt he ought to be honest about what he was feeling. This confrontation was especially painful for us at ARC for one of our concerns is the unity of the Church. We certainly did not want the celebration of the Eucharist to become a disruptive matter in our center and would rather forego it altogether than have it create problems.

The service was held in the ARC chapel late that Saturday afternoon. When it came to the distribution of the elements the Roman Catholic students stood around the altar. The protesting Protestant was also there. When the priest came to him he placed the elements on the altar and faced the student. The pain of that moment was so great for both of them that they threw themselves into each other's arm and wept openly. The official Eucharist had not been shared and yet there was communion at a very deep level. It was not a satisfactory solution but it was a good ending. Would it be inappropriate in such moments to recall the ancient words, "What God has joined together let no one put asunder"?

Perhaps nothing has separated Christian churches more than the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. What originally happened in a very ordinary location in the course of a domestic event (the sharing of an evening meal) has become the new Holy of Holies and many veils protect it. Participants are restricted, elaborate garments and expensive vessels adorn the ritual, formidable theological defenses have been erected and those who are authorized to preside are strictly regulated. The Eucharist has become a guarded, closed, exclusive and hierarchical affair. Is that what Christ intended? If Christ has promised to be present where two or three are gathered in His name, what other safeguards are required to guarantee what Christ himself has promised? The effort to regulate the free movement of God's Spirit on earth from ecclesiastical heights does not work.

At ARC we celebrate the Eucharist in ways we believe respect its meaning and the various traditions from which members of the community come. We all say the words of institution together and pass the elements to each other. We all take turns serving as the "table waiter" (the original meaning of the term "deacon"). We know we are

venturing beyond officially prescribed boundaries. However, we are not an official congregation but a household, a small ecumenical community seeking ways to celebrate the presence and work of God in our midst. Here is a group of consenting adults who are Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, etc. To which Bishop do they go for permission? This is uncharted territory we are exploring and though risks are involved, we seek to take them responsibly. We are well aware of the limitations imposed on larger systems and we are willing to take these risks on their behalf. Scouting parties are required by all large systems to explore possible futures. That is a very responsible task whether officially authorized or not.

The Microbes May Win

A recent newspaper article suggested that insects are winning the battle for survival against all the predators allied against them, including humans and their chemical pesticides. My first reaction to this news was an ominous one with visions of science fiction films in which the earth is devoured by giant cockroaches. But on second thought, the news that the micro world might be on the winning side was reassuring because from all visible signs it seems that only the macro systems have the upper hand today. So let's hear it for the microbes for a change!

How can one cope with trans-national corporations that seem to be omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent? The 7 - 11 chain store that has been built by such a corporation right next door to our neighborhood store operated for years by a local family will soon drive the other the older family store to ruin by undercutting prices for awhile. One feels powerless over against such odds.

Massive global problems of war, poverty, ecology and hunger so dwarf any private response that one simply does not respond at all. Human institutions have grown so large and complex that most of our energies seem to be devoured in the maintenance or monitoring of them - both of which activities keep us from our primary tasks. The equation of bigness with success has perverted the values of education, political and religious institutions alike. The massing of people, power, information, decision-making and money at single points has overloaded administrators as much as it has oppressed those who are excluded from the privileged positions.

At the conclusion of intensive efforts to build impressive edifices, to construct ideal curricula, utopian societies, successful careers and gigantic systems I observe more evidence of entropy than synergy. The spirit seems more depleted than before and even less able to provide courageous and salutary alternatives to such macro efforts.

But perhaps the insects are winning after all! Perhaps it is only a myth that the huge systems that easily and loudly claim the headlines and readily intimidate the rest of us are succeeding after all. A small band of African blacks dedicated to the liberation of their nation can and have toppled European governments. A handful of scattered groups sustain the hopes of millions in Latin America. A few well chosen words from prison or exile had been the decisive difference in revolutions ancient and modern. Here and there are signs that in spite of and often in rejection of the efforts of those who control media and institutions there is an amazing resilience, if not immunity, amongst enough ordinary people to at least place in question the omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence of the macro systems.

A four year old said it very succinctly: "The big devil can't do anything to me because I'm so little!"

What should be clear too many now is that the preoccupation with the huge government structures and similar conglomerates in industry and education have diverted too much interest and energy from the base without which all these super structures become meaningless and impotent. Basic education, basic community life, basic relationships, basic faith and basic skills are too often the casualties of the upward rush to bigger and loftier positions.

More and more persons are carefully examining life styles that support alternatives to the prevailing institutions that seem more intent on controlling rather than supporting the base. Many institutions appear to live from rather than for their constituencies. Efforts toward more simplified living, new household communities and other efforts at the local level may seem peripheral and easily discounted until one is reminded that the microbes may win in the end. Small beginnings that can die easily but they also can adapt more readily than large structures. That is the biological and political secret of the micro world.

Christ deliberately gathered the few and prepared them carefully, rather than organizing mass rallies. Micro communities at the base pose both threat and promise to the colossal human enterprises that appear to control the

future. We do well to attend to the fragile growths of religious and social micro systems for the survival of us all - micro and macro alike. The proper function for the macro system is to create space for growth from the base. Ultimately it is a win/win situation for both insects and human kind alike. The micro and macro are interdependent. This appreciation of the power of the micro was particularly significant one day when I received a call from a retired military officer.

"Would you be willing to speak at our men's retreat?", asked the voice over the phone. The date was clear on my calendar so I agreed. When I asked further questions about the theme, the place and the size of the group I was surprised to learn that 150 men would be participating. That was hardly my idea of a retreat. Furthermore, I knew from all the congregations I had known that getting men to participate in a retreat was no small task. The voice on the other end of the phone, however, was filled with confidence.

"I just retired as a career military officer", he informed me, "When my church said they needed someone to take on this job I volunteered. Things are already organized. I've got my captains, sergeants and corporals all lined up to see that this will be a great success".

It was good to hear of such confidence, but I wondered if the former officer realized he was not in the military any longer but in a voluntary organization where authority functions quite differently. But I didn't think it was my role to make any comments in this initial contact. He promised to keep me informed. A few weeks later he called still enthusiastic and confident. "There will be 125 attending", he announced. "Ah", I thought, "A little more reality is setting in." The next call came a few weeks after that and now I could detect some uncertainties in his voice. "There will be about fifty", he said. "Not as many as I hoped for but it will be a great event anyway."

That was the last phone call. I drove out to the retreat site and there waiting for me out on the road was a disheveled creature. It was the former officer but now there was no straight military bearing, no blatant confidence. What I saw was an obviously dejected human being.

"It's a disaster", he announced almost clutching at me in desperation. "It's a bust. Nothing went the way I planned it. What can we do? It's terrible."

"How many did you finally get?" I asked quietly not wanting to add to his panic and not really surprised that his military operation hadn't worked in the church. I had already suspected that when I did not receive any more phone calls.

"There are five of us including myself", he said dejectedly.

"That's just fine with me", I replied. "With that number we can have a real retreat. You may not believe that now but wait until we are through Sunday afternoon and then see how you feel about it."

It was a very good experience. With that few there was a depth of community and sharing that would have been impossible with the large numbers he thought were needed for success. Sunday afternoon as we concluded the weekend he was a different person. Perhaps he had discovered that the economy of the army and the Kingdom are not the same.

Appropriate Scale

As the church moves toward more primary forms she will discover resources that she never realized were there. Those resources will be discovered in the underground networks unknown to the official systems above ground. I discovered that at a meeting in Holland years ago.

Near Utrecht in central Holland is the town of Driebergen. It is the home of *Kerk en Wereld* (Church and World) one of the earliest church centers of lay training. In 1970 it was the site of a meeting of SODEPAX, a joint venture of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches to deal with issues of society, development and peace. The meeting, one of the few in the short life of this experiment at ecumenical cooperation, was focused on communication. People came from various parts of the world to share their experiences and needs in the field of communication. Among the presentations were some high tech models using satellite transmitters. Technology had already connected all the continents and the churches were encouraged to use it. That argument came from some enthusiastic proponents from the rich nations of the West.

After listening to the sales pitch for satellite communication, a bishop from Africa said, "In our land the drums still beat the telephone. When we use the phone only one other person is informed. But when the drums start to beat, everyone knows."

Rosemary Haughton describes the way the "drum system" worked in the first days of the Christian church:

The news was spread from wife to husband, mother to child, sister to sister or brother, friend-to-friend, neighbor-to-neighbor, in whispers through the city and the countryside. "He is not dead, he is risen." "We saw him." "She saw him." "My Aunt Johanna saw him." "My cousin Mary saw him." . . . so when the public preaching began, it is really not surprising that the numbers grew . . . with a speed which can in no way be explained purely by the efforts of the small number of accredited apostles. . . . So the new faith spread around the Mediterranean as gossip does spread, but a gossip ("God-sibs" means "God-related") not of bad news but of good. And so it has been ever since, and so it must be now.⁷

Has God's strategy all along been a small scale one? The heaven? The "least of these"? "Wherever two or three gather?" Such promises imply the wide spread dispersion of resources. If that is true then any gathering no matter how small has tremendous potential: the cell group meeting in secret in oppressed lands, the family, the coffee klatch group, the few colleagues who share a common concern, you and your spouse or another friend. But the scale is critical so that the contribution of each can be respected and quickly wedded to the tasks at hand.

Smaller and more people-sized institutions and arrangements are not simply necessary and desirable but flat out possible. . . . The world of bigness would not be able to sustain itself - not politically, not economically, not socially - from the strains imposed by systems stretched too far, organizations grown too big, cities stuffed too full, environments picked too clean, technologies made too uncontrollable, populations become too ill served, economics grown too chaotic and poisonous.⁸

That God promises to be present in such small gatherings is mysterious, joyful and liberating revelation. Here is the most profound and intimate moment of community. Where else do we meet the neighbor as significantly as at this level? It is, therefore, a most significant moment of our encounter with God. As the primary becomes more significant our society will come to understand and appreciate that the potential of each person is realized not as an isolated individual but as a person in community. The scale needs to be appropriate for the task at hand.⁹ I have argued for the value of the small scale. But are not larger scales also needed? The small group of five or six sharing intimately their own stories create a free space that a large assemble could not. One simply does not bare one's self before a large assembly. On the other hand it needs to be admitted that the same small group of five or six would be hard pressed to perform Handel's Messiah. And we need to hear the Messiah performed from time to time.

I think I generally subscribe to the idea that "small is beautiful". That seems to me to be wise counsel for a society where things have become so immense that the average person can easily feel powerless and obsolete. But when I think about it further, I realize there are some things that are better when they are larger. One case in point is the family household. The nuclear family has become too small to meet all the demands made on it by the larger society. But rather than abandoning it, as some seem to be suggesting, why not rather recognize that the potential of the few who constitute family groups today needs to be shielded and supported by some new version of an "extended household" or base community? Again it is a question of appropriate scale. One of my most memorable experiences of community was in a large, a very large family - one with sixteen kids!

In the summer of 1949 I was sent to Southwest Germany to take up my work as a resettlement worker with the Lutheran World Federation Service to Refugees. Unlike the Displaced Persons in the other zones of occupied Germany, those in the French Zone lived independently in small villages and towns. The office where I was to work was in Schwenningen so a room had been arranged for me there. Because of the shortage of housing after the war it was not easy to find a place to live. Therefore, I was amazed when I was told that I would be living with a family that had sixteen children. "How could such a family still have room for one more?", I thought as I made my way down the street from the office to the address nearby where I was to live. The house was a large building which had many rooms. It was the parsonage of the local church and very spacious as parsonages often are. But this one was especially large. My room was a small bedroom on the second floor.

My arrival was a matter of great curiosity to the family though one might think even a stranger could easily get lost

in the crowd that already occupied the place. As is typical of houses in that part of Germany, there was a large entrance hall. When I was led into this hall the mother clapped her hands and suddenly kids began coming out of rooms from all directions many of them bounding down the stairs. They lined up with the smallest at one end the biggest at the other. The oldest was sixteen. There were three sets of twins. They each introduced themselves in turn standing erect like a line of dominoes but bowing as each in turn gave their name. It was quite a sight and I thought I was in the Trapp Family. As it turned out I was not so far from the truth since the family was quite musical and we had some great times together. I remember in particular one incident during Christmas when I introduced them to pop corn. In the center of the large living room on the second floor was a small stove. I put a pan on the stove and added some lard and then put the kernels of popcorn into the pan but left the lid off. The children were all gathered around to see the strange food from "Amerika". When the corn began to pop and shoot all over the room, there was delightful bedlam.

In that large household I was made to feel at home immediately. They knew how to offer hospitality. Though I was on the road a great deal, I was included in family activities from time to time. The mother was from the Baltic region. She was a small, wiry and energetic person. She had the household so organized, however, that she never appeared to be overburdened despite the size of the family. Everyone had a job. Each morning all the newly polished shoes were lined up in a row (just as the kids had been). The father was a very quiet, almost mild little man. But there was order in the house. It was the kind of order that prevented chaos, that got things done, but also made the place humane. Perhaps there was more authority than I perceived on the part of the parents for once at the end of the church service I was surprised when the "mild" Pastor scolded the congregation in no uncertain terms for its poor singing and made us all stay after the service for fifteen of "choir practice".

The family really enjoyed one another. I saw that for myself but was particularly impressed about that when I was shown some sketches of the family's move from Pforzheim to Schwenningen. They were drawn by an aunt who was a skilled cartoon artist. Pforzheim had suffered terribly from bombing and they had had a difficult time. But the drawings showed an almost festive atmosphere on moving day with all the kids helping to load the two buses required for the task.

Some twenty years later I happened to be driving in that part of Germany and decided to drop in for a visit. As it turned out it was Mother's Day and many of the family were home. I came totally unannounced but was immediately welcomed. The children, now adults, were all doing very interesting things. Nearly all were in some form of human service occupation. Several were working in Third World countries. Being raised in a large family certainly did not make them disadvantaged. Quite the contrary.

I still argue that "small is beautiful". But there are times when bigger is better. What is important is the appropriate scale.

The New Dispersion

There may be some who argue whether or not the church is *indispensable*. In raising the question of scale I want to argue whether or not the church is *indispensable*. Are we are willing for the sake of personal and institutional renewal to live as God's dispersed people. I would argue that just as the dispersion of Israel was crucial for the growth of the early church, so the dispersion of God's people in primary communities is critical for survival, growth and mission of the church today. Luther and Wesley never saw the institutional forms that were created in their time as final. Structures are penultimate. Unfortunately there is less recorded history of the church in its dispersed forms than in its settled forms. Records report largely what the gathered church in its institutional activities (councils, conventions, committees) has done. History has been viewed from the "top" and seldom from the "base." But the strength of Christianity has always been in the power of the root system despite the fact that the underside of history remains largely unrecognized. Moreover, the most strategically dispersed people in the primary world are women.

According to Karl Rahner, the hierarchy of the church will, in the near future, lose its power and the laity will have to do the church's work in the world. The church's survival, he argues, will depend not upon a massive ecclesiastical assault upon the world organized along military lines, as in the Crusades, but in the *diaspora*, or the scattering of God's people. The vitality of the church depends, in Rahner's words, "upon the openness, the freedom, the total sincerity with which the ordinary Christian" meets and challenges the non-Christian with the gospel in one's own language. Rahner sees the diaspora not as a grim era to be born bravely and stoically but as a challenge and promise of hope to the courageous Christian. When the institutional church has been stripped of financial support from secular sources, as was the case in the German Democratic Republic, it had to depend upon its ordinary

members for survival. The missionary program had to assume a new form: what Thomas Merton called "the purity of individual witness".¹⁰

The typical congregation's scale makes it both awkward and advantageous for the renewal of individuals and society. It is awkward because it is neither a primary nor a secondary system but something in between. For that very reason it is in an advantageous situation because it can serve as a mediator between the two: on the one hand encouraging the indigenous development of small groups, while on the other hand challenging secondary institutions to live for the base rather than from it. Perhaps a new voluntarism will emerge. What if institution began volunteering to help members build primary communities rather than recruiting members to build the institution? In the long run healthy roots will produce fruits above ground.

Thus far I have been making a case for the primary becoming primary. But that case cannot be made without a parallel one: that the secondary be secondary. My intent is to state the case as strongly and as sympathetically as I can on behalf of the secondary system's new role in order to restore a balance that will give both the primary and secondary new life and hope. I do so as one who has worked within institutional settings and continues to do so. As the importance of the basic community is recovered the secondary institutions will be liberated from the vertical, hierarchical role and can become the valuable and necessary partner in a balanced relationship with the base. Partners do not force loyalty from each other.¹¹ Even God does not do that but seeks a covenant: a relationship of un-coerced love. As partners the primary and secondary can serve each other freely through voluntary service and covenant. Creative gifts are unleashed by mutual respect not by demand.¹²

No doubt in every secondary structure there have been moments, now recalled nostalgically, when a healthy balance existed and when trust and sacrificial service gave vitality and quality to the enterprise. Such moments, unfortunately, shift inevitably to vertical stratification. The creativity and power which mutual partnership generates is centralized at the "top." Power works against the laws of nature running uphill as the "Peter Principle" demonstrates. But while power runs uphill while the whole operation goes downhill.¹³

No institution is worth saving for its own sake. But it is eminently worth saving for the sake of others. That applies to both primary and secondary systems. They are both healthy when they become agencies of voluntary, joyful and committed service to each other. Today secondary institutions are over burdened with expectations from within and without. The restoration of the primary can relieve much of that pressure and give the secondary institutions that free space that they need to respond sensitively and creatively to the base. The health of the secondary lies in enabling the base. When the roots are strong the secondary can wither away as new growths emerge from the soil.¹⁴

Partnership And Survival

Primary systems find their health in creating free space for the person to realize her or his gifts just as secondary institutions discover their potentials by providing free space for the primary.¹⁵ When the struggle for a balance turns into competitive warfare (understandable given the over-balance that exists) then of course neither finds its vocation. The vocation mutually shared by both primary and secondary is to secure, encourage, protect and enhance the functioning of human community. Both primary and secondary institutions exist for the sake of people. This is a "high" calling at a "low" level. It would be pointless to discard secondary institutions. All that would accomplish would be to guarantee that all our energy would be absorbed in re-inventing them. True liberation for both primary and secondary institutions will come in restoring them to human service and to human scale.

Institutions, are, after all, the invention of humans to meet certain needs. They are not able to trace their origin back to the first day of creation despite the rhetoric of divine right they sometimes employ. They came much later and were created to serve people's needs. The most sensitive seismograph for recording those needs lies in the roots. That is why I have been arguing for beginning with the soil. To the degree that grass roots or basic Christian communities do what they claim they can do better at the local level in response to the Gospel, to that degree they will restore the secondary systems to their proper role. If the base chooses to operate on the prophetic edge, then it will need the support of secondary institutions like the ancient monarchies that respected the voice of dissent in the form of the "court jester".

In his study of the church in public affairs Wolfgang Huber comes to the conclusion that the church in its secondary forms cannot take risks based on faith because it is persons and not structures that have faith. Therefore, the institutional church needs to safeguard the primary community where the daily living out of faith takes place.¹⁶ The

significant and more attainable revolution for the church, therefore, is not in changing secondary structures as such (too often such exercises are little more than window dressing or merely moving the furniture around) but in realizing that the real change comes from the roots. Such changes occur more effectively through quiet transformation rather than by noisy barrack's revolts.

The relationship between primary and secondary is usually described in mechanical and vertical terms with the aid of organizational charts. The relationship is actually an organic one and requires a completely different model. Regeneration begins with a seed that dies in the soil: a painful, mysterious and messy business. Only as the seed is protected during the initial stages can growth leading to fruition be achieved. Too much intervention is destructive. You cannot dig up the seed every week to check progress. As the delightful neo-Celtic stories from the Findhorn Community in England testify, this process is one of mutual respect between nature (what is inherent in the seed) and the human caretakers (the institution). The wisdom needed does not belong exclusively to one or the other, but to both together in a lively, and respectful dialogue. One of the surprises and disquieting aspects (from the institutional perspective) of this organic process is that most of the process is self-managed. As John MacQuarrie puts it, "God is the one who 'lets be.'"¹⁷

Large institutions are finding it hard to survive. For one thing they have come to depend too much on nonrenewable resources. The costs of maintenance, the eroding of loyalty among the constituency, the growing bureaucracy and the disillusionment among those who are their caretakers are familiar symptoms in secondary systems. No matter how high the salary, it is not enough to hold personnel when their primary life is falling apart. The secondary cannot survive without the base. That is true economically, politically, psychologically, biologically and spirituality. In both the East and the West more and more energy is going into security services to hold the system together. This is no sign of health. Rather, it is an ominous sign of a dying system. Despite the impressive technology, it is well known that the final act of a dying institution is to erect its most prestigious structure.

On the eve of disaster will we finally become wise enough and recognize that survival lies in neither the destruction of the secondary institutions nor in the abandonment of the primary ones. Through most of human history populations were limited to restricted landmasses and the village and tribe provided the protection for the individual and the primary group. Is not the critical priority today creating local communities that can nurture healthy households?

The family household has been a central fact of human culture since the beginning of history; it has been the only economic institution shared by virtually all human societies over all of human history. Now it exists in the shadow of the market economy. It has been rendered largely invisible by the ideas and habits of thought that have dominated Western culture for more than two centuries. But, irrespective of its lack of visibility, it is there - nascent, growing, and revolutionary.¹⁸

Modern history has seen the unabashed pursuit of larger and larger social systems: nation states, multinational corporations and international agencies. The base has been considered incapable of managing its own destiny. In many Socialist countries bureaucrats have taken over and the worker remains the bottom of the heap while in many democracies individual citizens often feel powerless. In both cases a demeaning attitude toward the masses prevails despite the rhetoric. Yet there are more resources now in place for more participatory systems than ever before. The stirring amongst masses was never on the scale that is has been on the eve of the last decade in this millennium. I would call this the "silent revolution" not only because I believe that silence (or lying fallow) is powerful in evoking what is in the roots, but also because the changes in the soil are largely unheard and unseen.

This "domestic" revolution in the soil will take many forms. Some activities may appear innocent on the surface but they can represent major changes underneath. The following incident is about an innocent act that shook the foundations.

During the year of 1990-91 Ruth and I were watching, reading and visiting with Europeans as monumental changes were propelling that part of the world into new political and economic arrangements. Not only were there the fallout's of the incredible events of 1989 in Eastern Europe, but we followed closely the reunification of the Germany's and their first elections, the preparations for the economic union in 1992, the struggles of dying socialist systems throughout the East, the Gulf crisis, the search for new arrangements in the Soviet Union, the demands for independence of the Baltic countries, the connection of the England and the Continent by a tunnel and the always present issue of what will the new society be like. I wondered if the movement for change that had originated from the base would continue to direct the course of things to come.

Although I have been an outside observer to all of this I was tempted to make one suggestion. Given the ancient history of Europe with its Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, monarchies, dictatorships and centralized systems, why not allow the bottom up process to direct the process this time? Why not let the practical experience of ordinary people struggling in this century to find a common life through a "hands-on" experience be the way to the future rather imposing ideologies produced by the intellectuals of the previous century? For that "hands-on" process I have a simple proposal: lock small groups of people from various European countries into train compartments for a trip across the new Europe. I make this proposal not from some idealistic theory but from an experience Ruth and I had once on just such a journey.

In February, 1982, Ruth and I were traveling from Southern Germany to Uppsala, Sweden. In our train compartment were three other people. One was a business man from Czechoslovakia, another an elderly Latvian woman now a German citizen, a third a well dressed woman from Hamburg, myself and Ruth. We were a microcosm of an international community, a slice of what Europe is struggling to become. I think the experience we had traveling together could be a significant learning model to prepare Europeans for their future life together.

We began our trip in silence. I was sitting between Ruth, to my right, and the rich woman from Hamburg to my left. Across to my right was the Latvian grandmother and across to my left was the Czech. Ruth took out a book and began to read. I took out my piece of cross-stitching and began to sew. I was making a special gift for one of our kids. After a while I noticed that the woman on my left was becoming quite restless. She would occasionally look, actually stare, at me and then at Ruth. Finally to our complete surprise she shouted at Ruth in German, "You should be sewing, he should be reading!"

We have lived enough years in Europe to know that such forthright outbursts are quite out of the ordinary. She was really upset. She turned on Ruth and continued a tirade covering a whole series of issues: working mothers, latch key children, men who had no backbone, the decay of family and society and the number of foreigners in the country. The Czech and the Latvian were not very happy about that. I chose to remain silent figuring I had spoken already with sufficient eloquence by what I was doing. Ruth tried to respond civilly but the woman was not interested in a conversation. The Czech was trying to become invisible. The Latvian grandmother was eager to speak to us. She was a dear. "The kind", Ruth said later, "That you would like to wrap up and take home with you". The Latvian woman had been intrigued by what happened in the confined compartment and began by saying how much she loved to do sewing and how she was interested in what Ruth was reading. She asked who we were and what we did.

Ruth responded by telling her about the ARC Retreat Community where we were living with people of various denominations, experimenting with a simpler life style and seeking to explore a more holistic spirituality that brought prayer and justice together. The Latvian woman was fascinated and kept pressing for more details. All this time the woman from Hamburg was getting more and more agitated although she didn't say anything more. Finally she stood up, straightened her furs and stomped out the door slamming it hard. She moved down the corridor and there, out of sight of our compartment, stood all the way to Hamburg. Meanwhile in the compartment a lively conversation ensued. Even the previously silent businessman joined in. We were sorry the little community broke up when we came to Hamburg.

I don't know all the reasons why the women left our compartment. I suspect that she felt threatened not only by what we were doing but also what we said. Perhaps her whole world was being placed in question by the events in that small space and her only response was to escape. I'm sorry about that because who knows what other areas of concern or values might have surfaced had she remained for the conversation. We had only begun to explore the diversity that we represented. We had many other things yet to explore such as religious traditions, family and occupational backgrounds, travel, cultural interests and hobbies (beyond reading and sewing, of course). She may have found some significant points in common. Who knows what might have happened if we had all remained together?

So I'm sad the woman left. We need to learn how to get on in restricted spaces and find ways of surviving together despite our differences. Such groups traveling across the □Europe could not only enjoy the beauty of the external spaces they would see, but more importantly they could explore inner spaces as well. For that is where the new Europe must begin. I do not see sewing as a subversive activity. After all if everyone sewed, think what we might reap!

A few months earlier Ruth and I had experienced another kind of "train community" when we traveled from the far Eastern region of Siberia on the Pacific Ocean via the Trans Siberia Train to the Baltic Sea. During the many days on the train we came to know a Russian couple a few years older than us. Although we did not speak any language in common, with the help of pictures of kids and grandchildren, a map of the Soviet Union and gestures we learned a great deal about each other. The man was a police commissioner in some remote Siberian city. We did not solve the international problems but had we traveled further, who knows?

I once wrote a little piece while working in the Ecumenical Center in Geneva some years before about what a shared experience in a congested space might achieve. After seeing the many divisions in an international organization I sat down and wrote a fantasy about an elevator in the Ecumenical Center that became stuck between floors for five hours. Inside was a collection of people who would normally did not speak to each other: a hippie, a secretary, a janitor, an African church leader, an Orthodox Bishop, and a woman tourist from Canada. After five hours they had become acquainted having shared many personal experiences and beliefs. Although they were not of one mind, they had discovered that they could survive together.

There are challenges ahead that can drive us away from primary communities or propel us into new patterns of relationship. In the next chapter we will explore the new roles and challenges that might be expected in the shift to a human scaled society. Like new shoots that are sent up from the roots these small initiatives have tremendous power sufficient to break even hardened soil. Dorothy Day said it well years before:

If I stayed long enough in one place . . . I would be very interested in local politics . . . I think that when it comes down to it, . . . the state should be a community of communities." (And then she quoted William James.) "I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny invisible molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man's pride."¹⁹

I will explore where the rootlets are already breaking through in the next chapter.

¹ Parts of this chapter have appeared in *Word & World*, St. Paul, Luther Northwestern Seminary, summer, 1982.

² Cited in Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, o. 77.

³ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, Penguin Books, New York, 1961, p. 650.

⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, New York: Warner Books, 1979, pp.385, 396.

⁵ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale*, New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980, pp. 13 ff.

⁶ Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, p. 115.

⁷ Rosemary Haughton, *There Is Hope For A Tree*, p.24. See also II Tim. 2:2, "Take the teachings that you heard me proclaim in the presence of many witnesses, and entrust them to reliable people, who will be able to teach others also."

⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 18, 500.

⁹ William Everett makes the following observation about scale in *God's Federal Republic*, p. 140: "We have varying needs. Some of us can be served by small groups, some by those of medium scale, and others only through institutions that embrace a whole territory. Just as we don't need a state to organize softball games, so we find family charity inadequate to organizing an industrial economy."

¹⁰ James Baker, *Thomas Merton Social Critic*, p. 60.

¹¹ For further discussion of the relationship of alternative communities and existing church structures see Jim Wallis, *Call to Conversion*, pp. 119-121.

¹² Rosemary Ruether, in "'Basic Communities': Renewal at the Roots," *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 41, No. 14, Sept. 21, 1981, p. 234, states:

The continued vitality of the church depends on a creative interchange between converted community and historical institutions in which both recognize the specific role of the other, in which the committed community does not become strangled by trying to replace the

historical institution, and the historical institution does not rebuff the self-actualization of community.

¹³Richard Cornelle, *De-Managing America*, p. 40. Cornelle goes on to argue:

A society should be at least as good as the sum of the potential of its parts, but our society is not. Our reliance on management has produced a society that is less than it could be. We are collectively much less than we are individually. Management suppresses and limits, diminishes the quality and quantity of our human responses.

¹⁴This observation is made by Raymond Fung in "Case Studies from China," *International Review of Missions*, Vol. LXX, No. 278, April, 1981, pp. 3-4:

That the central reality of the church in China today is that it exists, period, also means that no one outside can claim it. Confessional and denominational claims have lost their binding power. Other categories factors which divide the Protestant churches everywhere have little significance inside China. . . . The Christian church has many weaknesses and needs. But it exists in China and is rooted in its soil. Until we recognize this reality among one quarter of the world's people, we are not likely to see it as a fellow church to be respected, and indeed to learn from.

¹⁵It is important that we acknowledge that both primary and secondary are institutions. Both serve humankind but at different levels and sometimes in different ways. Like the Sabbath, however, institutions were made for humans and not vice versa.

¹⁶Wolfgang Huber, *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit*, Forschungen und Berichte der Evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft, No. 28 (Stuttgart, 1973).

¹⁷John MacQuarrie in *Principles of Christian Theology*, New York: Scribner, 1977, argues:

God's goodness, like his creativity and his love, is founded in his "letting-be," the basic characteristic of Being. . . . In an atavistic time, theologians have too much stressed dominion as the meaning of the divine image in man, but contemplation and acceptance are just as much needed for the ordering of human life.

¹⁸Scott Burns, *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁹Judith Nies, *Seven Women*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 202.